



# Smithsonian

December 1978

## Victorian High Renaissance (p. 48)

Above, detail of *May Sartoris*  
at 16 by Frederic Leighton







By Peter Wood

# Business-suited saviors of nation's vanishing wilds

*Smooth operatives of Nature Conservancy  
preserve our heritage through showing  
corporations how to do well by doing good*

For most people, the word "conservationist" suggests a certain image: a hardy soul decked out with stout boots, backpack, hiking staff and a combative gleam in the eye. But the operatives of the uniquely successful preservation organization called The Nature Conservancy don't fit that image at all. Indeed, they appear to have been outfitted not by L. L. Bean but by Brooks Brothers, and if there is a gleam in the eye, it is less combative than businesslike.

Time and time again these buttoned-up environmentalists have beaten out developers in the tug-of-war over America's dwindling stock of wild places. Their organization—"the real estate arm of the conservation movement"—has consummated more than 2,000 land deals and has been responsible for saving more than 1.3 million acres of America's natural heritage. Where government agencies have been unable or unwilling to act, the vigorously private Conservancy has stepped in to preserve mountains, forests, marshes, prairies and islands from coast to coast. Most significantly, it has achieved its goals while engender-

ing the cooperation rather than the antagonism of corporate industry.

At the Arlington, Virginia, headquarters of TNC (as it calls itself) a distinct hum of purpose pervades the premises. To a man and woman, the Conservancy staff, an impressive blend of scientific, legal and business talent, knows precisely what it is up to. First, *identification* of the nation's remaining ecologically significant lands. Second, *acquisition* by purchase or gift. And third, *stewardship*, the maintenance of lands in their natural state, in perpetuity.

Part of the reason for TNC's success, of course, is that donations of land or money are tax deductible within limits. And, of course, the \$10 annual dues paid by TNC membership (currently 60,000) are also tax deductible. In short, TNC raises funds the same way as the Red Cross, the World Wildlife Fund or any university—through public appeals, special fund drives and hard digging wherever it senses there may be money and a willingness to help. Increasingly, this means from among the ranks of former environmental suspects. International Paper, Union Camp, Georgia Pacific, Anaconda Copper, Gulf Oil and Metromedia have all donated, or sold at prices below market value, thousands of acres of choice wilderness to TNC. Other companies such as IBM, Atlantic Richfield and Ford have given or lent millions to the cause, while 182 businesses are listed as corporate members, paying a minimum of \$1,000 annual dues.

What TNC does today is in no way simple, if only because nearly every one of the roughly 200 projects it takes on each year is a special case. Nevertheless, the basic strategy is the same. TNC demonstrates to businesses and private donors how they can do well by doing good—how a gift of land or money, which, because of tax benefits may cost them little, can save an endangered habitat.

TNC seeks a variety of havens for its acquisitions. Roughly half are passed on, usually to a government agency with demonstrated stewardship capabilities, but also to local conservation groups and town or county governments.

Sometimes the transactions become so complicated they would make a Wall Street firm feel proud. Take the case of a reserve for the endangered sawback turtle in Pascagoula, Mississippi. The state wanted the land for a 32,000-acre wilderness preserve, had the money to buy it and a framework in which to hold it—a Natural Heritage Program which had been designed for them by TNC. But the company that owned the tract refused to sell. The Conservancy simply bought

With his *Wall Street Journal* at the ready, Nature Conservancy President Patrick F. Noonan (right foreground) and his top lieutenants take time out for a rare visit to the kind of place they try to save. Clockwise from the left are L. Gregory Low, Thomas Beers, Ray M. Cutler, David E. Morine.

*Free-lancer Peter Wood is a seasoned traveler in wild places. His recent book, Running the Rivers of North America, is about white-water sports.*

controlling interest of the company—something that the state could not legally do—voted a dissolution, and turned the land over to the state of Mississippi.

When the Conservancy does keep title to land, it makes strict provision that the investment will be repaid and that there is a self-sustaining maintenance program. An example is Mianus River Gorge, in Westchester County, New York. It was the first of TNC's acquisitions, and its purchase marked the beginning of the organization as it exists today. TNC had its roots in the Ecological Society of America, which established in 1917 the Committee for the Preservation of Natural Conditions, a small group of naturalists and scientists who were alarmed even then by the depletion of our natural areas. In 1946, the Committee became a separate entity—the Ecologists Union, which encouraged other groups to establish natural areas. And by 1953, it found its first independent project as TNC at Mianus, a beautiful piece of hardwood forest only about 30 miles from New York City (p. 85).

Working out of their living rooms, a local volunteer committee raised most of the money needed to make the purchase, and got a final \$7,500 through old-school-tie connections from a Mellon family philanthropic organization.

Since then the Mianus River Gorge preserve has grown from 60 to 362 acres, without any further financial aid from TNC. Vigorous local fund raising and gifts from private landowners have accounted for all of it. There is a chief warden-naturalist who lives nearby and watches over the preserve. He receives a salary. The rest of the considerable work of stewardship and fund raising is carried on by volunteers.

TNC has grown rapidly since those early days. The operating budget ran to \$2.8 million in 1977, and this does not include the cost of buying land, which topped \$135 million last year. There are 210 on the payroll,

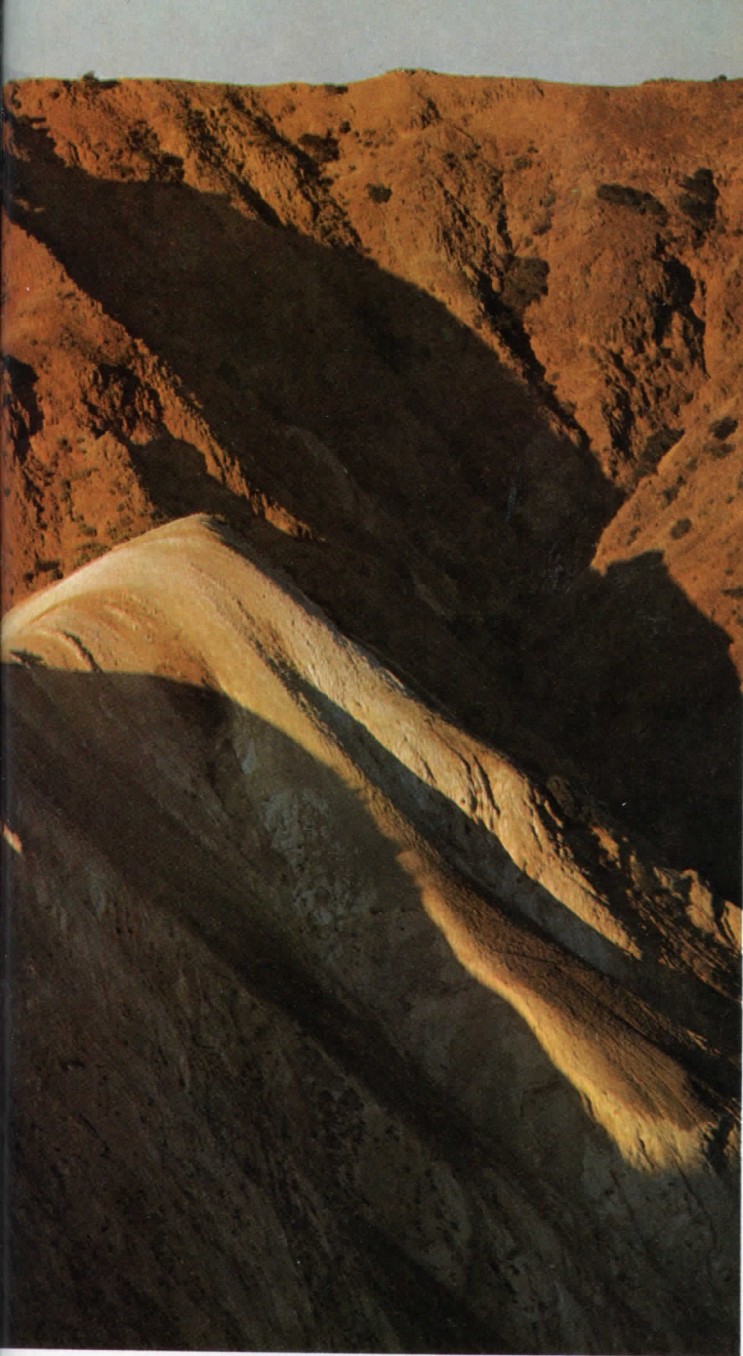


One of TNC's major acquisitions is 90 percent of Santa Cruz Island off Southern California coast.

about a third of them working out of the Arlington headquarters, the rest spread through regional offices, field offices and state chapters. There are eight lawyers on the staff and more than a few others with master's degrees or higher, mostly in business administration and the sciences. The great majority of staff members are in their twenties or thirties.

There is also a board of some three dozen governors, most of them men and women of substance, including the obligatory du Pont and Rockefeller, with strong connections in the world of industry and finance. These connections with the movers and shakers of the country represent TNC's most valuable asset. A word





Under a complex agreement, the Conservancy bought 15,000 acres, gained control of another 40,000.

on the golf course or over lunch may ultimately be worth millions in conservation lands.

But however much the board is able to smooth the way, it is the Conservancy's president, Patrick E. Noonan, who sets the fast pace and provides the leadership. Appropriately, no one typifies better the Conservancy's current persona. Noonan, who has master's degrees in both business administration and city planning and is a professional appraiser and licensed real estate broker, took charge of the organization in 1973, when he was just 30. Five years later one is still struck first by his youth, and after that by the cut of his jib—very square. There simply is nothing about

the man that hints of a desire to slog through bogs or salt marshes or to climb to the tops of high mountains. Of medium height, a bit overweight, he wears his fair hair a touch long, perhaps, for someone in finance—but probably all right for a salesman, which, after all, may be his strongest suit. “We are in the real estate business,” he says flatly. And however he might comport himself on a trail with a 60-pound backpack, on his own ground he is fast talking and as sure of himself as a mountain goat.

“Land-use decisions are still made on the basis of dollars,” he says, speaking of the tax advantage TNC's nonprofit status gives to potential “clients.” “And we usually can make an attractive deal at an average of 70 percent under market value.” Of developers and industry: “We are in a conflict-avoidance situation. Ignorance is the enemy, not the developers. If we can pinpoint those ecologically significant regions that remain in this country *before* a developer or industry wades in, we can save them. And we can do so advantageously to both parties, the future generations of Americans *and* the business interests involved.”

#### *Bargain sales in barrier islands*

Ignorance certainly was at work in 1970 when a development company announced its intention to invest millions to turn three of the barrier islands off the Virginia coast—Smith, Myrtle and Ship Shoal—into “King's Beach,” a sprawling, luxurious retirement and recreation community. The low, wilderness islands provide a natural breakwater against the Atlantic, protecting the bays and salt marshes behind them. These waters are a spawning ground for an incredible variety of wildfowl, fish, mollusks and crustaceans and are of inestimable value to sportsmen and commercial fishermen. The development intended for this sandy wilderness included a causeway to the mainland, countless residential lots—each with its own outlet to the ocean—yacht basins, hotels, private clubs, shopping malls, convention centers, business and professional buildings, an airport and a seaplane facility.

Learning of this, and wanting to establish a foothold in the area, TNC quickly bought nearby Godwin Island. After acquiring Godwin Island, TNC began months of intensive negotiations with the Smith Island Development Corporation. Then, with the “money market” in a slump, the prospect of insufficient fresh water for the grandiose plans, and tremendous pressure from other environmental groups, the corporation decided to back down. It sold the three islands to the Conservancy for about \$180 an acre at a bargain sale.

A bargain sale is one at below appraised market value. When made to a nonprofit organization, the



## *Businesslike Nature Conservancy*



Parramore Island is part of a 60-mile-long chain the Conservancy has saved along Virginia's coastline.

seller may claim a tax deduction for the amount of the difference between the seller's price and the appraised market value. If the seller is in a high tax bracket to begin with, he may receive approximately the same return as if he had sold the property on the open market. Bargain sales are one of the most effective levers the Conservancy has to pry loose land it wants. The \$1.25 million needed for the purchase was provided by the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, a New York philanthropy.

Eventually, through gift and purchase, the Conservancy would acquire the 13 barrier islands that form the Virginia Coast Reserve—they stretch 60 miles from the Virginia-Maryland border to the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. In the case of one of them, Metomkin, which was owned by a developer who refused to consider any offer from TNC, it was necessary to set up a bogus corporation. Offshore Islands, Inc. bought the island at going market value, donated its only asset, Metomkin Island, to the Conservancy, and quickly closed its doors.

One of the last remaining natural seashores in the country, the barrier chain is a magnificent diadem in the Conservancy's collection. An ecological and social survey of the islands—also funded by the Cary Foundation—convinced the Conservancy that it was better suited than any government agency to protect these fragile outposts. Within their stewardship program, the Virginia Coast Reserve has become both model and laboratory. As at Mianus, the public is welcome on the islands during daylight hours to wander the miles of pristine beaches. But it takes a boat to get there, and one can walk for miles along the beaches and not come upon a footstep other than one's own.

### *Good hunting in the executive suite*

If it was foundation money that turned the trick at Mianus Gorge and made possible the purchase of Virginia's barrier islands, the hardheaded world of business also promises rich rewards for TNC. It is significant that in a prominent spot on the wall of Noonan's corner office there hangs a plaque reproducing a 1973 editorial from the *New York Times*. It congratulates the Nature Conservancy for its part in persuading Union Camp to donate for a nature preserve 50,000 acres of its holdings in the Great Dismal Swamp which straddles the Virginia-North Carolina border. "The Union Camp Company," the editorial concludes, "has set an example which other industrial units can follow to the enhancement of their own reputations as well as to the country's advantage."

So public a pat on the back brings beatific smiles to the faces of public relations directors. It also means that Noonan, chief mover in the Union Camp deal,





In South Dakota, the Conservancy owns 7,600 acres of prairie, where it conducts research on the

preservation and restoration of grasslands. This area is home of the endangered ferruginous hawk.

can find a welcome in the president's office of practically any big corporation in the country. Which, it turns out, is pretty much the way he spends most of his time.

Like the meticulous organization man he is, the Conservancy's president keeps a careful record of these activities. A day spent recently in New York City was followed up with this trip report: "9:30 A.M.—Messrs. Noonan, Northrup [Brad Northrup, director of the Eastern Regional Office based in Boston] and Payne [John Payne of the New York office] met with the corporation chairman, and delivered the hawk picture [a handsome color photograph of a mother ferruginous hawk protecting her brood]. He was appreciative and said he would hang it in a prominent place.

"We subsequently discussed a gift of \$75,000 to \$150,000 worth of tradelands in Connecticut which we will sell to the state and net \$75,000 for LPF. [This is the Land Preservation Fund—separate from the revolving fund. Product of a special drive begun in 1976, it now stands at \$12 million, with a goal of \$20 million. It is to be used for large land acquisitions.] He was interested in this and we hope that more might develop from this meeting.

"10:30 A.M.—Noonan, Northrup and Carlin [William Carlin, head of the New York Development Office] met with oil company official. Briefly brought him up to date on Santa Cruz Island [a major recent acquisition]. In addition, Brad will send some information for publication in the company's mailing that goes to their employees regarding our preservation in the Greater Westchester area and Connecticut."

The memo continues through the day with three more meetings, one with the lawyer of a former generous donor, who explained that because of a sudden drop in the man's stock, his net worth has been cut drastically. The only possible major gift from him now would be via a life income trust (a gift to the Conservancy that continues to pay dividends to the donor for the remainder of his life). "Action: Noonan to write him a nice letter suggesting this and Carlin will follow up, as appropriate."

And so it went through the day, with a final meeting at 4 P.M.—after which, presumably, Noonan was able to catch the shuttle back to Washington. Or he may just as likely have flown on to Minneapolis and spent the night doing paper work in his hotel, preparing for another round of meetings the following morning.

"We are all fund raisers," explains Brad Northrup, whose enthusiasm, youth—he is 34—and straightforward professional approach are very much in the Noonan mold. Three of us—Northrup, Eve Endicott, a Yale Law School graduate who is TNC's field director for New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and myself—were seated next to one another on the 6:50 A.M. Allegheny flight from Boston to Albany. The purpose of the two-day trip was to look over some parcels of land that Tim Barnett, who heads TNC's Adirondacks chapter, had identified as both "ecologically significant" and possible to acquire. One of the areas belonged to the International Paper Company, whose extensive holdings make it one of the largest private landowners in the United States. International Paper (IP) had already expressed its willingness to cooperate



## *Businesslike Nature Conservancy*

with the Conservancy with the donation, in 1976, of 26,000 acres of marsh and wooded uplands in Georgia. A second area, the land that TNC coveted most, was 2,800 acres encompassing a steep rocky ridge above a small pond. This parcel belonged to a small lumber company, and it contained one of the few known golden eagle nesting sites in the Adirondacks. Because of its dramatic location, deep within one of the least disturbed areas of the Adirondacks, Barnett had scheduled it as the finale of our tour.

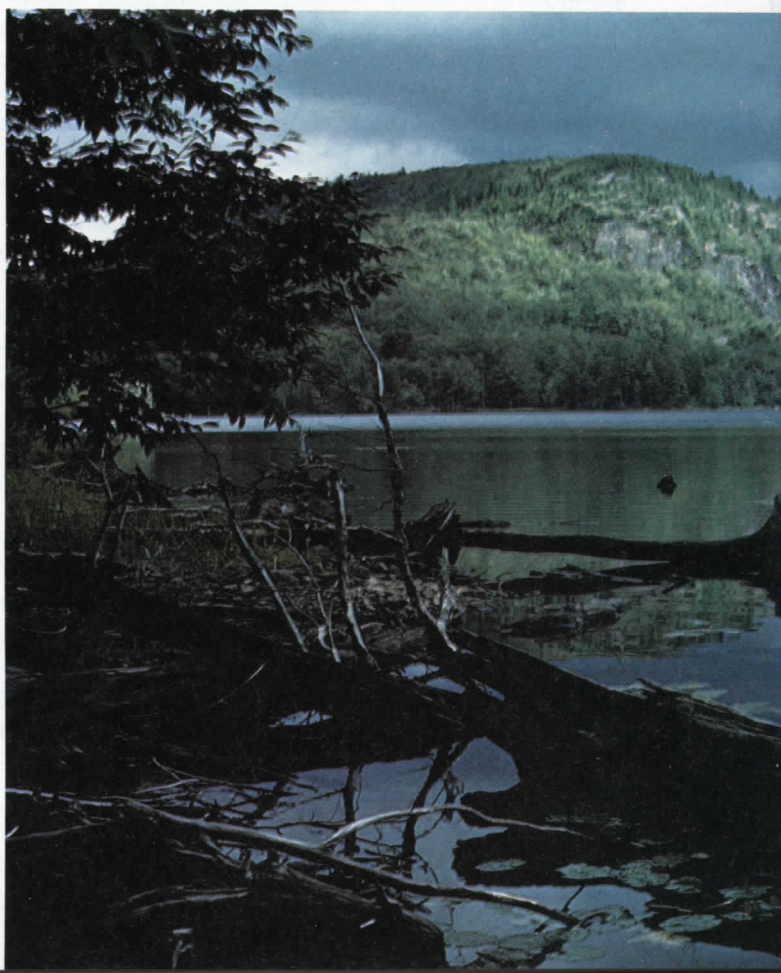


Golden eagles' nest (above) perches on cliff near Adirondack pond TNC hopes to preserve (right).

The official visit began in the offices of International Paper in Glens Falls, near the southern boundary of the Adirondacks Park, a 9,000-square-mile, largely wilderness checkerboard of public and private lands, inside which all the parcels lie. Here we were met by Barnett—39 years old, dark, mustachioed, and with something of the look of a Canadian voyageur.

Our host was Donald Whittemore, former head of IP woodland operations in New York State. Whittemore introduced us to two foresters who would accompany us on our inspection later that day. One was Douglas Charles, a land-use specialist from IP's New York Office. Charles came with the blessing of IP's vice president for wood products and resources, John Stephens. Stephens' appraisal of TNC could not have been higher. "The professionalism of the team they have put together at all levels is admirable," he explained recently. "They understand the balance there must be between economics and conservation. With us they have total credibility." An outfit like IP is constantly being barraged with requests (and threats) from various conservation organizations, local and nationwide. Stephens now channels all these through the Conservancy.

Don Whittemore was more skeptical. Giving land to the Nature Conservancy, he pointed out, might seem like excellent public relations to the head office in New York, but not here in the Adirondacks. In





1977, average unemployment was about 12.5 percent. The local people see such donations as little more than a tax dodge. Whittemore himself saw it as "eroding my productive timber base." Local sportsmen were also against it, he said. Hunters and fishermen can rent permits from IP, and they fear the Conservancy will post the land it acquires.

Northrup answered Whittemore's professional objection by pointing out that generally the land the Conservancy is after—wetlands, mountaintops, river gorges that might support unique and endangered communities of plants and animals—were the sort that foresters consider marginal at best. As for the land's coming off the local tax rolls and the objections of local hunters, one strategy was for IP to give TNC a conservation easement on the land. What this means is that IP maintains title, is still able to cut timber, grant hunting permits, pay taxes and even sell the land, but the company gives up forever the development rights. And although that may not be exactly what TNC considers optimum, it would be much better than nothing.

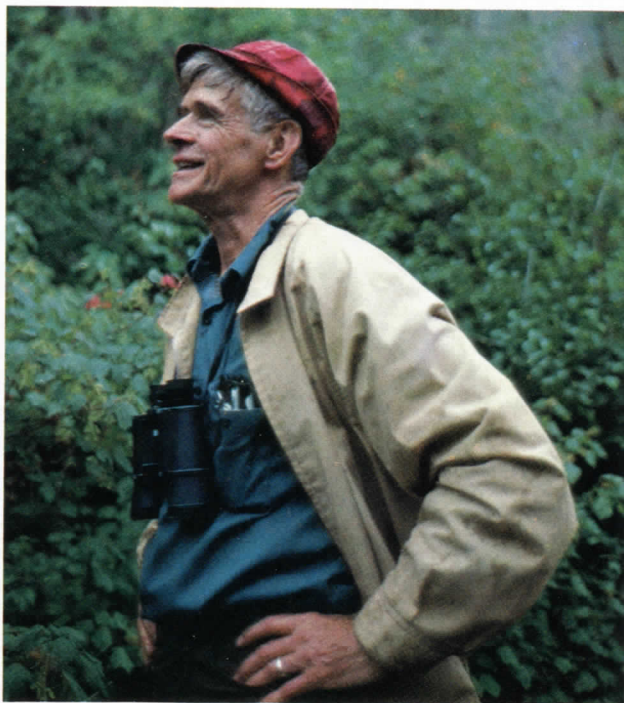
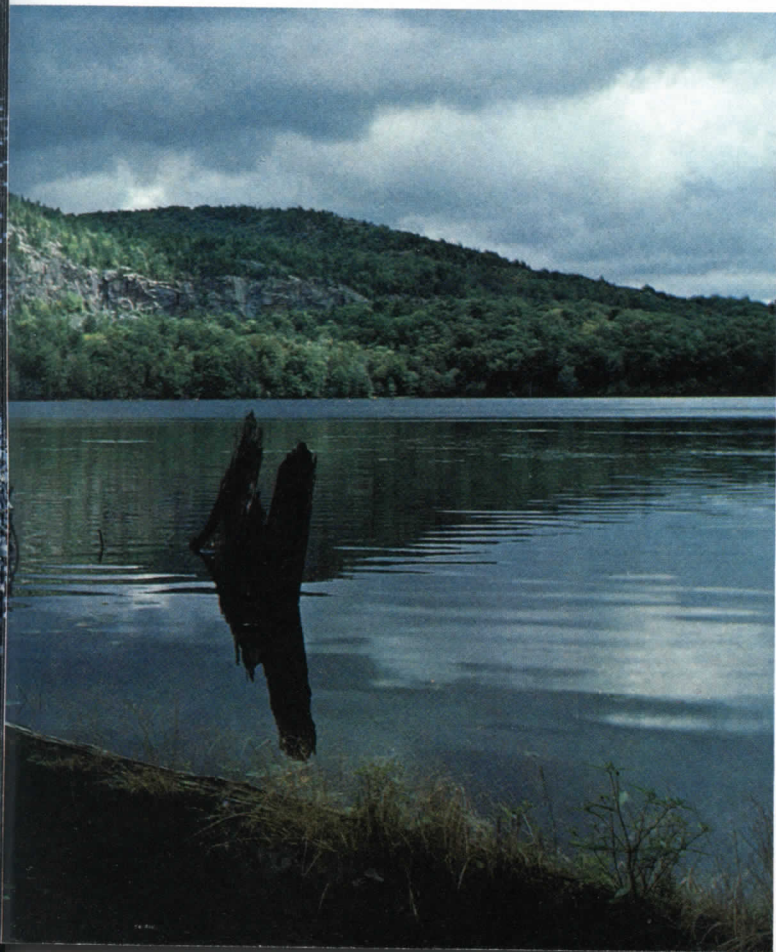
Nor would it be the first time, Northrup continued, that the Conservancy had been forced to compromise. "Take hunting—our standard posting is a 'no hunting' sign—but we temper that with reality. In Maine, for instance, we don't post our holdings—if we did we would never get back into the state. We depend on

local game laws for protection. What's more, some of northern Maine is even more depressed economically than here. In most of Maine we pay all the regular property taxes."

Before the meeting broke up, Northrup, Whittemore and Charles were exchanging views on business philosophy. They were not far apart, and it was obvious that Northrup had struck a chord that would elicit maximum cooperation in the future.

The rest of the day was spent driving deep into the park to look over two marshes IP owns and Auger Falls on the Sacandaga River. The falls themselves are on state land but the trail to them crosses IP holdings. One passes through a deep, somber forest that opens suddenly to reveal the cataract. The concern of the Adirondacks chapter was that IP might one day sell that particular piece of timberland to a developer. It would kill forever the dramatic impact of the place.

We spent the night at Saranac Lake and the next morning rendezvoused with one more IP forester and with Greenleaf Chase (below). It had been Chase, a Conservancy volunteer and member of the board of the Adirondacks Conservancy Committee fund, who became aware of the golden eagle nests in the area. As if his name were not enough, in Chase one found at last a Nature Conservancy operative who fitted the traditional part. Square of jaw and lean as a long-distance runner, Chase, now 66 and retired, spent 34



The nest was found by Greenleaf Chase, who, like many Conservancy field men, is an unpaid volunteer.



years in the Adirondacks as a wildlife biologist with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. He is a local expert on the golden eagle and can speak with concern—though without sentimentality—about numerous instances of those magnificent birds being shot by hunters and farmers. Walking and talking with him, one soon recognizes in Chase a man whose rapport with nature is exceptional.

With Chase our small group of foresters and TNC personnel took a look at a golden eagle's nest, this one in a venerable white pine standing beside a boggy lake. In the wide crotch a pair of golden eagles had placed a few sticks. That was perhaps 20 years ago. Since then the nest has grown to the size of a small tree house.

Golden eagles, Chase explained, mate for life. They usually return to the same area to nest year after year, provided there is sufficient food. The densely forested Adirondacks are not prime hunting habitat for eagles. What Adirondacks eagles depend on for food is a certain amount of carrion. A hard winter for deer will leave occasional carcasses when the snow melts. Such a winter means a bountiful spring for eagles. But the female eagle is a finicky nester. She likes to have as many alternative sites as possible. Thus, within a 50-square-mile territory, a pair of eagles maintains several nests. Each spring the male reestablishes possession of the nests by decorating them with a branch or two, even while his mate is elsewhere. Some seasons, however, the eagles don't show up at all. When one or both are shot, as they all too frequently are despite laws that protect birds of prey, it may be years before another pair takes over the territory, but when they do, it is likely that they will take over the nests of the former tenants. As far as Chase can tell, the nest near the pond (p.82) has remained on the active list.

The pine tree nest had not been used recently, but

eagles might return at any time. The tree stood only about a quarter mile from an IP logging operation moving in its direction. Of course the foresters were willing to spare the single pine, but TNC wanted more than that. In order not to scare the eagles away permanently, a certain amount of forest should be left around the nest. How much was a matter for experts to say and for IP to grant. This particular land was, after all, a prime resource base.

On the plane back to Boston that evening, Northrup explained what he believed would be the outcome of the trip. One of the two pieces of marshland, along a riverbank, has no timber value and would not need the Conservancy's protection, and the other parcel, a freshwater marsh, would need further negotiations to determine its future. Auger Falls might be protected by a conservation easement. As for the nest in the white pine, once expert advice had been taken on the amount of protection needed, Charles would see that the local foresters were instructed to keep their operations at a safe distance. The pond nest site, which we had visited at the end of the second day, required a special negotiation with the smaller timber company. And that would be undertaken. Then, before the 45-minute flight was over, Northrup opened his bulky briefcase and was deep in paper work. Could he have forgotten so soon the spell cast a few hours earlier, when we had stood atop a rocky ledge above the eagles' nest, at a spot Chase declared to be his favorite in all the Adirondacks?

At our feet grew a small clump of ladyslipper orchids. The green-mantled mountain and silver bands of open water receded to a misty horizon. From where we stood it so happened that no sign of Man intruded, no road or building or smoke rising. It took a wrench of the imagination to make oneself aware that across that apparently trackless wilderness lay a constricting net of property lines, timber rights, mineral rights, water rights, hunting leases and development easements, plus a bewildering number of provisions laid down by overlapping layers of township, state and federal laws. Yet it was so. And whatever the quality of outrage one might feel at the thought of this magnificent vista being broken by highways, industrial stacks and cabin communities, it would remain a subject for impotent rage without the expertise of people like Endicott, Barnett, Northrup and Noonan—a new breed of environmentalist eager and able to protect our national heritage using the same tools and methods as those who might alter it forever.

Conservancy's first acquisition, Mianus River Gorge, is spot of wilderness about 30 miles from New York City.



